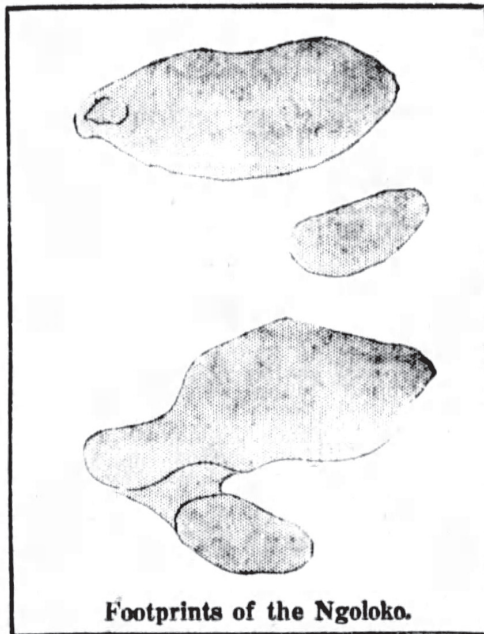


# The Ngoloko

J. A. G. Elliot

The following reprint is from *Blackwood's Magazine* (Nov. 1917). It was first published anonymously, but a 1933 collection gave the author's name, Lieut. J. A. G. Elliot, who is known to have published a few other articles during that period about his travels in Africa. In 1920, a condensed version of this article was published in various newspapers, along with a tracing of the 'spoor' of the mystery animal (shown below). Alice Werner noted in *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (1933) that she was told the Ngolooko was more like a giant snake; she thought that the creature Elliot wrote about sounded more like the mythical Ngojama. Either way, she noted, the spoor tracing appeared to be an ostrich track.



## THE NGOLOKO.

(A MYSTERY OF THE AFRICAN BUSH.)

THE day's march is done, camp is pitched, and the headmen and elders of the locality have come and gone. The evening sun lights up a long expanse of still lagoon, whilst away in the distance the white crests of waves mark the swell of the Indian Ocean breaking upon the coral reefs that guard the lonely shore. Half a mile to the right, on the edge of a low sandy cliff, and almost hidden by baobab-trees and thick vegetation, stand the ruins of an ancient Arab mosque. But the fast-falling night peculiar to the tropics soon blots out the landscape, and it is time for a "sun-down," a bath, and change. Dinner and bed follow in due course. Once more it is morning; but the tide is out, and a delay of several hours ensues before the "safari" can board the two small dhows that have been brought in for our use. As I go down to the larger boat, a black snake glides across the path. "A bad omen, Bwana," says one of the boys; "we had better turn back and go another day." I reply: "Such things are only applicable to black men, and not to me." The incident is quickly forgotten in the bustle of stowing away the loads, getting all on board, weighing anchor, and pushing off. I seize the tiller of my boat, my cook takes command of the other. The sails go up together, and in a few minutes we are racing over the waters of the lagoon, with the south-westerly monsoon blowing almost right behind us. The larger dhow slowly forges ahead of the other, and as we do so the Arab boatmen pass jeering remarks. I steer for an indistinguishable point in a bank of mangroves. As we approach, the sail has to be changed from one side to the other, and then in a few minutes we glide up a creek into the forest. In ten minutes or less the sail is stowed, and we slowly pole up a winding waterway. What with overhanging branches, shoals, and sharp turns, the steersman has his work cut out. It is a weird sensation passing through a mangrove swamp in this way. As far as the eye can penetrate through the forest, all is water and very still. An occasional bird, a gurgle of the rising tide, the swish of the boat—and that is all. Even the porters are hushed for a time. The even tenor of our way is, however, brought to an end by our grounding on a mud-bank. Now all is changed: everybody tells everybody what everybody should do. A pandemonium of voices and curses follows as the cook's dhow, with flaunting shouts, safely passes by. At last, with a deal of pushing and loss of breath, we get clear and pro-

ceed as before, except that now the men take up a boat-song, in which the chorus is sung as a solo and the verses by all the rest. As a consequence the soloist is the only one whose words are distinguishable, and begin—"Fatuma 'napenda mi." The sense of the remainder is, however, fairly obvious, and tells of how the fair Fatuma, married to an old and ugly husband, bestowed herself on one more appreciative of her charms.

Still the mangrove forest goes on. It seems endless; but an open space of water allows the sail to be run up for a short time, and soon after a glimpse is caught of the offending boat as it rounds a corner ahead. More mangrove swamp follows, and then a creek, opening into a large lagoon. The sail is up to stay; we are no longer sheltered by the trees, and with the full force of the breeze we overhaul and pass our opponents. A tow rope is offered, but angrily declined. By this time we are getting fairly close to the sea; a bank of low sand-dunes separates us on one side, whilst on the other a desolate outline of low-lying country offers no hospitality. Ahead the unchecked waves of the ocean are seen breaking into the mouth of the lagoon. Being a person whose admiration of the sea is limited to a standpoint on *terra firma*, it becomes clear that a landing should be made without undue delay. A solitary canoe lies tied up near the shore, so we direct our course towards it. There is no cove,

no shelter, and we land by merely running the dhow ashore. The second boat arrives a few minutes later, and all disembark. A native's foot-prints in the soft sand now guide us through a quantity of the silver-leaved uvuzi-vuzi bushes and self-sown mivinji trees (the casuarina) to a path which takes us, half a mile or so farther on, to a small settlement consisting of twenty or thirty huts huddled closely together; several goat "bomas," raised 10 or 12 feet above the ground, denote also that here wild animals abound. Camp is pitched on a knoll, from which a fairly extensive view can be obtained over a small plain and the more distant bush or forest country beyond. Towards the sea, however, there is thick vegetation, also a belt of mivinji close to and parallel with the shore; whilst mangroves thrive in primeval glory in all the swamps and low reaches near by. A little farther afield great spaces of dry sandy mud, quite destitute of any vegetation except for an occasional low bush, possibly a variety of stone-crop, render the aspect as desolate, God-forsaken, and forbidding as can well be imagined. Except for the small settlement referred to above there are no inhabitants, for the few wandering Wa-Sanye, or wild bush-people, can hardly be counted as such. The day passes without anything of special notice, but it so happens that there is to be an eclipse of the moon,<sup>1</sup> and instead of turning in at the

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<sup>1</sup> Night of July 4, 1917.

ordinary time, I draw my chair up to the camp fire to watch the phenomenon. A dozen natives and others are already sitting round, too, roasting mealie cobs and eating them. As I quietly smoke my pipe, I listen to what they are saying. It is about nothing in particular, but as the shadow gradually creeps over the face of the moon one man says that such things are uncanny. They all agree; and talk of the fish that has been recently caught at Zanzibar with words of the Koran found naturally marked upon it;<sup>1</sup> also of the child lately born at Mombasa with three legs, two faces, and four eyes. These happenings are interpreted as spelling the speedy downfall of the Germans—a long-hoped-for wish. Then some one mentions the black snake seen that morning—what did that portend? Asmani strikes in too, "And did we not start this journey on the fifth day of the week?"<sup>2</sup> And as the proverb says, "Rats that leave their holes on a Wednesday never return."

"True," says Juma, "and when the moon hides her face 'tis a bad time for the children of Adam. We heard the spirits in the mivinji trees wailing as we passed beneath them; they knew what was about to happen."

"To happen to the moon or to us?" says another.

"Who can tell?" continues Juma; "but when spirits walk abroad 'tis well to be indoors. However, we are in the hands of Allah."

It is now just on midnight, the eclipse is full, and I am on the point of going to bed, when "oo-ee!"—we all lift our heads, for the sound though distant is clear and penetrating.

"What is that?" I say. No one answers. Then another "oo-ee!" nearer this time, and with a note in it that sets one's hair on end.

"What is that?" I repeat more peremptorily.

"The Ngoloko!" whispers some one.

A couple of extra logs are thrown on the fire, and all close in.

"What is the Ngoloko?"

"A jinn," replies Juma.

"Nonsense," I protest, "you are all going daft; you had better go to bed, as I am."

"I am not going to sleep whilst a Milhoi is about," says Asmani; "nor I," "nor I," join in the others.

"Well then, in that case, let us hear about this devil. What do you know, for instance?"

"I know what I have been told, and no more. Originally the Ngoloko was a good spirit, and lived with all the others

<sup>1</sup> A photograph of this remarkable fish is reproduced in 'The East African Standard' of July 7, 1917. The markings are not artificial, and are in Arabic characters. An Arab, who was in Zanzibar and has seen it, reported the writing to be: "La illah la illah la" (There is no God but God) on one side, and "Shani Allah" (A miracle of God) on the other, which is only a slightly different version to that given in the newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Swahili calendar Friday is equivalent to our Sunday, and Saturday is called "Juma Mosi," or "first day"; and consequently Wednesday is Juma Tano, or "fifth day."

in friendliness and happiness; but one day it did something wrong, so it was chased away and taken up to heaven. After a time it was driven down again by shooting-stars, and appeared on earth as a Milhoi, to be shunned by all. That is why the creature lives an isolated life away in the forests and mangrove swamps, and is comparatively seldom met with. When it lies down it sweeps a place clean, it feeds on honey and drinks blood, herds the buffaloes and drinks their milk, or kills them and eats them as it thinks fit. It smells worse than a lion, and any one who has skinned the latter is not likely to forget what that is like. It will change its form so as to enable it to approach its victim, and will speak any language under the sun."

"That reminds me of the story of the Röch in the book of El Boohari," breaks in Seif bin Mohammad. "There we learn that once a wicked people climbed on each other's shoulders until the topmost one put his ear to the roof of the sky and listened to the words of Almighty God, who, becoming very angry, told His servants to cast out the intruder. Then the wicked people were bombarded with fire, brimstone, and shooting-stars until all fell down, the survivors—many blinded—returning to the earth in the shape of the Röch or Ngoloko, and destined to live ever after in desolate places."

"This is all very well," I

interpose, "but has any one ever *seen* the Ngoloko?"

"Yes, I have," says Sheikh Ali bin Nasur; "but it is not a thing to laugh at, and I, an old man and an Arab, say it. Well, sixteen years ago, when I was about forty years of age, and before my beard grew white, I was on my way from my shamba<sup>1</sup> at Kikombe Tele to Malindi. It was about 7.30 P.M. There was no moon, but the night was not dark. As I was getting near the sea-shore I heard a woman's voice shouting 'Eh!' three times, some distance in front of me. I thought it must be a woman who was on her way home and was frightened of the dark. I went on down to the shore but saw no one. I thought it peculiar, but walked on. After a time something made me look round, and then I saw a woman of little over medium height following about 100 paces behind. But she was not walking so much as springing along in high bounds. I stopped, and so did she. Then I walked on, and she followed. Again I stopped, and she did the same. I knew then and from the way she walked that she was no daughter of Eve. She was a Milhoi. She followed me along until we came near the big white rock,<sup>2</sup> and there she disappeared into the bush. There was no path anywhere near. She wore loose dark clothes, but I could not see whether they were skins or not."

"A poor story," I observe

<sup>1</sup> Shamba—property, or cultivated land.

<sup>2</sup> A well-known sailing mark, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile north of Malindi.



when he came to the end, "and one that is not going to make me believe in your jinn. Obviously a girl was on her way home in the dark and was frightened of the look of your beard. Probably she thought you a Milhoi."

"It is not so, Bwana; this is the month of Ramathan and I would not perjure myself by saying what is not true; besides, call on Aohmed for his story, for he, too, has seen the thing."

And then Aohmed bin Abubaker begins as follows: "One day, about seven or eight months ago, I went to Mambrui from Malindi, as I so often do. I crossed the Sabaki river by the ferry, and pursued my way as usual along the sea-shore. It was midday, and very hot. Suddenly I noticed a human figure of great stature, about eight feet high, standing near the beacon on the hill on my left. The giant came down towards me, and as he did so he changed his form to appear more like that of an ordinary man. When he got about fifty paces off he called out to me, 'Aohmed bin Abubaker, my dear brother, stop a minute—do.' I stopped. Then I saw that he kept one arm hidden behind his back, and that the hand of the other terminated in a great hook. He was clothed, and had a gourd slung close under an arm. His hair

was of a reddish-yellow colour and fell back from his head in a wild tangle as far as his waist. His own colour was that of an ordinary man (a native). His face was that of a human being, but broad. He had a large thumb on each foot. When I saw this terrible thing advancing on me with a springy walk, I thought my last day had come, and I covered my eyes in my terror and called out—

"Allahu Akbaru Allahu Akbaru  
Allahu Akbaru Allahu Akbaru  
Ashehadu Anlaa Ilaha Illa Illahu  
Ashehadu Anlaa Ilaha Illa Illahu  
Ashehadu Anna Muhammada Rasulu  
Ilahi  
Ashehadu Anna Muhammada Rasulu  
Ilahi  
Haiya Allah Swalaat  
Haiya Allah Swalaat  
Haiya Allah Lifalaah  
Haiya Allah Lifalaah  
Allahu Akbaru Allahu Akbaru  
La Allah illa l Allah.<sup>1</sup>

"When he heard that, he knew he was overpowered. He turned aside and went back to the hill. As soon as the way was clear I ran off as fast as I could, and after getting to what I thought to be a safe distance, looked back. There he was still climbing up the hill, and as he got near the top he took to his original form, and finally crossed over the summit and was lost to sight."

<sup>1</sup> Translation of the Athani—

"God is Great (*bis*).

I believe that there is no other God but Allah (*bis*).

I believe that Mohammad is the servant of God (*bis*).

Come and pray (*bis*).

Come and be virtuous (*bis*).

God is great; there is no other God but Allah."

"Was it a male or female?" I inquire.

"I don't know; but it was supernatural."

"As it had long hair, and showed remarkable cunning, it must undoubtedly have been a she-devil; however, no self-respecting Ngoloko could possibly stand a prayer like that."

After a short break Hamis wa Ismail, who had just joined our group round the fire, starts to relate an adventure of his own. "It was," he said, "about sixteen years ago that I went one day with a Swahili carpenter to cut some wood in a mangrove forest near the Tana river. We came upon a medium-sized marsh bare of trees; we had not been there long before my friend signalled me to keep back, as if something were coming. I looked, and saw a Milhoi crossing the marsh from the other side. It came up to about six paces of the carpenter, and began conversing with him, asking him all about the people in his village by name. It had a shuka or scarf round the neck and partly over the head. I saw the creature had three fingers, one armed with a claw. It also had a gourd under its arm. One eye was blind and the other all askew. There was a certain amount of hair on the cheeks. It had three toes and a thumb, and big flapping ears. Its skin was of a grey colour, but covered with long sparse black hairs. It had no tail. A galla shuka was the only sort of garment it wore. The Milhoi was about eight feet high, and not very broad. Its arms and

legs were thin. The carpenter said, 'I know you to be a Ngoloko,' upon hearing which it promptly fled uttering piercing shrieks, and holding up the shuka in its outstretched arms."

"This is beginning to get interesting," I remark; "can any one tell us something more?"

And, with a little persuasion—for a native is very shy of speaking of a jinn, though you, reader, might not think it from this story—Mohammad wa Njamhidi commences as follows: "I have been a fisherman all my life, and live at Kijiwe Tanga, where the following occurrence took place. It must have been about twenty years ago, and I was not bent and crippled with age as I am now. I had two fully grown-up children. One day I went into the bush to cut wood, leaving them on the seashore doing something or other to the canoe. After a while they ran up and said, 'Did you call, father?' I told them I had not. Then I asked them from what direction they had been hailed; and they pointed. They also said that they had been called by name. I went with them to near the shore, and peered very carefully in the direction indicated. Then I saw a very tall man standing in the bush. I could see one arm, and the hand ended in a hook; the other was held crosswise, and buried in his shaggy chest. I knew at once it was a Ngoloko, and I quickly ran away before he could catch sight of me. It was a long time before I ventured near that spot again."

As I now look back to that night I must confess that it was with a distinctly creepy feeling that I finally turned in, but rest, breakfast, and a bright sun next morning made any qualms I had entertained the night before look nothing less than absurd. My work took me that day some eight or nine miles away, and on my way back to camp, which had not been shifted, I left the footpath I had been following, and, in spite of the midday heat, struck off after some game. I was not much more than half a mile from camp, and was crossing one of the bare spaces of dry sandy clay mentioned before, when I came upon a spoor such as I had never seen to that day. My boys noticed it too, and we all stood looking at it for some little time.

"What has passed here?" I inquired at length.

"The Ngoloko!"

"How old is this spoor?"

"About twelve hours." Others agreed.

"Twelve hours! Then it was just about the time that we heard that cry!!!"

"Yes, Bwana; we told you it was the Ngoloko, and you would not believe us; now you know how it was that we did not sleep."

And I did, for the tracks were indisputable; and they were tracks of a creature I should not care to meet without a loaded rifle at hand.

A reproduction of the footprint was taken on the spot by placing a piece of paper over the track and marking

the outline with a pencil. In ordinary soil this would not have been possible; but here, on the crusted sandy mud, conditions were ideal. We followed the spoor for a quarter of a mile, examining, measuring, and comparing it with human tracks.

As a result of my observations I obtained the following data:—

- (1) The animal is a biped.
- (2) The print had been made by a pad and not by a hoof, except that, at the point, a deep and sharp hole demonstrated the presence of a large nail or single claw.
- (3) A thumb-mark of considerable dimensions was a special feature; there was no trace of toes, except in one case, where very slight indentations by such seemed to have been made.
- (4) A heel was observed; but the weight of the animal was usually cast forward on to the main portion of the foot and thumb.
- (5) Its weight was judged to be at least twice that of an average man, and probably more.
- (6) A certain part of the spoor showed the animal to be walking very slowly; there the stride measured eighteen inches from tip of the toe of one foot to the heel of the other. It had also taken several gambols at one place, and crossed his legs when doing so. When travelling



at what I should imagine to be a jog-trot, the stride measured eight feet; two strides were found to be nine feet; whilst a considerably greater distance, it is presumed, could be covered when at top speed or jumping.

The above facts seemed of such interest that I determined to push my investigations further, and by great good luck came upon one Heri wa Mabruko, whose story I give, as far as possible, in his own words. It should be remembered, however, that the actual details he furnishes are the result of direct questioning. Also, it should be added, that he never seemed once to hesitate, being quite clear and certain in all his answers. He spoke as follows:—

"A long time ago I went out with some Swahili friends into the forest to tap the wild-rubber tree. It was in the Witu District. A Mboni man (a type of bushman) accompanied us. We were at short distances apart, busy at work, when the Mboni caught sight of a Milhoi stalking us from behind. So he let drive with his bow and arrow, and struck the creature, who immediately ran off. We followed, and found the Ngoloko about 400 or 500 yards beyond the place where he had been hit. When I came up, he was lying outstretched on the ground, and still breathing. It was a male, about eight feet in height, and in breadth just about the same as two ordinary men standing together. He was covered with

a great mass of long, thick, grey hair. It was especially long over the head and upper portions of the body, a single hair being quite a yard in length. He was built like a man, but he was no child of Adam. He had but one finger and one thumb on his hand, the former terminating in a single hooked claw  $2\frac{1}{2}$  or 3 inches long. The foot possessed a very large prehensile thumb and three toes, one ending, as in the hand, in a great claw. The face was hairless, displaying a dark skin. Nose very prominent and with two nostrils. The mouth was small, but larger than a man's; and the teeth were big. His ears resembled those of an elephant, and were each about the size of my two hands fully extended when holding the wrists together. The cheekbones were prominent. Forehead low and retreating, like a leopard's. Chin likewise. I did not notice the colour of the eyes, which were big. The eyelashes joined on to the hair round about the face; I did not look at them particularly. The smell was awful, and about ten times as strong as a he-goat."

The foregoing statements, together with the evidence afforded by the examination of the spoor, lead to the conclusion that there exists in the district referred to a remarkable and monstrous creature hitherto unknown. The species to which it belongs, its habits and its general appearance, can only be conjectured, for the difficulty of obtaining reliable evidence from those who have

seen this terrifying beast is much increased by the atmosphere of the supernatural surrounding it, and the more we investigate the more difficult does it become to distinguish between fact and fiction. Moreover, in this instance, superstition springs from a religious source—a fact which may, perhaps, be regarded as evidence of the existence of the Ngoloko having been long known by the native tribes.

The statement of the man Heri wa Mabruko is more reliable than are those of the others. Who, indeed, would not be able to give a more accurate and detailed account of a dead than of a live Milhoi, a live Milhoi perhaps advancing to attack? We may, then, fairly attach considerable weight to his observations.

He mentions the Ngoloko as being eight feet in height. This is corroborated by two other observers on two distinct occasions, while a third observer on another occasion said the Ngoloko he saw was "very tall." We may, therefore, be fairly confident that the height of the animal is much as stated. I ought, however, to remark that in certain instances proximity reduced its apparent stature—a fact which may perhaps have been due to the animal having adopted a crouching attitude when approaching its prey.

Its breadth is not authenticated with such certainty. That its weight is considerable we know from the tracks.

Heri wa Mabruko mentioned the presence on the hand of a single claw and of a thumb, both of which particulars are

referred to by other observers. He also mentioned the presence of a very large thumb on the foot: the accuracy of his observation is confirmed by the spoon.

His statement as to the ears being like those of an elephant is confirmed by Hamis wa Iemail.

His observation regarding the mass of hair about the head and upper part of the body is only indirectly confirmed. Sheikh Ali bin Nasur speaks of loose dark clothes, and conceivably he might, at night, have taken the mass of hair for such; Aohmed bin Abubaker mentions a wild tangle of hair falling back as far as the waist; and yet another observer talks of a shuka or scarf—an optical delusion possibly due to the excitement of the moment.

Its colour is generally described as grey, but the skin itself is dark.

We may conclude, then, that the Ngoloko or Milhoi is probably a variety of gorilla or chimpanzee, but more of a pure biped than either,—that it is about eight feet in height, and has a mass of grey hair which is especially long about the head and upper body, elephantine ears, a retreating forehead and chin, large eyes, a single claw—2½ to 3 inches long—on hands and feet, as well as a prehensile thumb, also on both hands and feet, of remarkable size and strength. Such is the Ngoloko as we can fairly reasonably picture him—a carnivorous denizen of the forest and mangrove swamps—a big and hideous brute, which one would, if alone and unarmed, have no particular ambition to meet.